INTERVIEW WITH ILIAS AKHMADOV

Dodge Billingsley

The following interview with Ilias Akhmadov was taken in January 1998, prior to his appointment as Chechen Foreign Minister, and renewed war between Russian Federal forces and Chechen separatists. The views expressed provide thoughtful insight as to how the Chechens perceive themselves and their conflict with Russia. More importantly Ilias Akhmadov provides a glimpse of how and why Chechens fight.

Can you tell me a bit about your background?

AKHMADOV: In 1991 I graduated from University of Rostov with a degree in philosophy. Ours was the first class in the Soviet Union to graduate having studied a non-Marxist curriculum. In 1991, when the events that we are all familiar with concerning sovereignty for the Chechen Republic occurred, I returned home. I worked for half a year with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At that time there was a big problem in the mountain region Karabakh. Basically, I worked on that, because there were individual citizens of our republic who would, on their own accord, get involved in that conflict. So the governing authorities sent me to get our citizens to come home. At the same time I participated in the search for those killed during the conflict, and in the exchange of prisoners. During the war (with Russia 1994-96) and after I left the city (Grozny)—I was a common member of the militia for three months. When I was in the ranks of the militia, I simply did what all the other soldiers did. General Basayev, who at that time was a colonel, assigned me to headquarters, and for most of the war I served as an officer of the general staff. And then I returned to Basayev to serve as his adjutant. I had other duties when I was the adjutant.

Ilias Akhmadov (left) and unidentified Chechen in Grozny.

How does the Chechen military work? It seems that each field commander has his own army.

AKHMADOV: Basayev does not have his own army. He was the commander of the reconnaissance and diversionary brigade, which is the most elite unit of the Chechen army. Currently, that brigade, for all practical purposes, has been taken from active service and placed under the authority of the supreme commander. That is to say, right now *the unit isn't* in the barracks, but in case of war we will form the brigade again. So we aren't active-duty soldiers. This brigade has basically ceased to exist, and is under the authority of the supreme commander in case of war. The current structure of General (Salman) Raduyev's army, however, is an autonomous structure. But that's a complication of this transitional postwar period.

There was no Chechen army to speak of before the war, at least not the giant army that the Russians talked about. All the other components and units were organized during the war by region because that was the only thing possible. That is, people—local militias—organized according to the region where they lived. Therefore, the fronts, of which there were seven (later, it's true, they broke up from time to time, and sometimes there were as many as 14), were formed by region.

Concerning operations—a very large weight was given to the personal initiative of the company or group commanders on their own part of the front. Conforming to some general strategy, all operations were conducted at their discretion, and depending on the possibilities. Therefore, we basically left the Russians, who attempted to do battle with us by the book, in a blind alley. The commanders of all our units, starting with squad leaders, who commanded seven soldiers, all the way to the Front commanders, who, without violating the general strategy of the war, basically took personal initiative in a wide variety of ways. So at headquarters we didn't have to write any special orders. Each person did all that he could, having thoroughly studied his own local and his enemy, and knowing all the possibilities. Therefore, this war was very mobile.

Now that the war has ended, the Chechen army is just barely beginning to get its own classical organization. Right now it is difficult at first glance to distinguish between this new army which is being organized, and the old army, which is comprised of the remnants of units which existed during the war. There aren't any complex problems regarding the fact that right now there seems to be two different armies. In any case, they are equally subordinate. These are the remnants of those fronts and the remnants of those units that haven't been added to the structure of the National Guard and parallel armed forces. When the formation of the new army is complete, all extra people bearing arms and wearing the uniform will put down their weapons and remove their uniforms. For our conditions our army will number no more than five to six thousand people, but that's an approximation.

The war had three phases. On the plains the Chechen rebels suffered greatly. In the center, between here and the mountains, they also suffered.

AKHMADOV: First, there aren't any Chechen rebels. That was a creation of the Russian mass media. The word "rebel" calls to mind a semi-underground illegal organization. This organization is manned by "rebels." But we never had any "rebels." Unfortunately, some of our uneducated commanders got hold of that word without thinking too much about its implications. From this source it began to spread among us. As I've mentioned, as of December 1994, we had four active-duty units. Everything else was organized fundamentally as local militias. Then, toward the end of February, Dzhohar Dudayev gave the order to dismantle the militias, which then became part of the regular structure of the army. So, from February 1995 on, we have had the armed forces of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. So it's not possible to call them rebels.

Phases? Well, if you make region the criteria, then yes, there were three phases. The battle for the city (*Grozny*) from 31 December 1994 to 23 February 1995; the battle in the foothills from March 1995 through 10 May 1995; and on 10 May 1995, the large-scale invasion of Vedino, Shatoi, and Zhiyurt began, which the Russians managed to practically complete by June 1995. The raid of the reconnaissance-sabotage battalion to Budennovsk under the command of then-colonel Basayev ruined these plans. Each of these three phases, of course, has different characteristics.

The battle of the city—urban warfare, even from the viewpoint of military strategy, is very complicated. Here is what happened; there was a massive invasion at dawn on 31 December from three directions with a force of about 650 armored units. Of course, all numbers are relative. It's very difficult to say how many there actually were.

Now there is a lot of discussion about whether the encounter was planned or not. It's hard for me to say. To tell you the truth, the outburst of the Russians was a surprise for me, because on the evening of 30 December, cannonades could be heard somewhere off at the city limits. I don't know how well informed headquarters was at the time. I was still an enlisted member of the militia, but for me the movement was unexpected. If one were to analyze this situation today, why there weren't any barricades set up, and why the Russians weren't met on their way to the city, we didn't have the physical strength to organize even one echelon of defense around the city.

We had so few people, that it seems fantastically improbably now, but in reality, from 31 December to the end of January, there were about 450 permanent defenders of the city. That's it. Simply put, all these forces were placed in front of the presidential palace, and the Russians made their way peacefully, practically to the presidential palace.

The Russians went along, not obeying any of the rules of war, because the distance between armored units was between three and five kilometers, which is just crazy. They were all drunk, and to my recollection, neither the officers nor the soldiers realized what was happening the first day.

The Russians were cut off in the region of Zh/D train station. There was a very fierce battle there, and also in the area immediate to the canning factory. A part of the column was also left in the area of Khankaly. From 31 December to 6 January these columns were cut off. On 7 January the Russians struck with even more force. The strongest artillery attacks on the city took place on 7 January. The Russians then managed to bring in their transport units from the north. These units united with the groups that had been cut off, and the second phase of the defense of the city began.

By 17 January, there was no coordinated tactical or strategic attempt to hold the presidential palace. When it was hit by depth charges, the commander of Headquarters, Division General Mashadov gave the order to move to the second echelon of the city's defense which was forming on the other bank of the river Sunzhi. All units defending the city had already moved there in an organized manner. In this way the second phase of the battle for the city began.

The basic tactic of warfare in the city was conducted by mobile groups of ten to twelve people, each group being armed with one grenade launcher, two snipers, and the rest with automatic weapons. Before 17 January, there weren't any well-defined lines of defense. The groups were always on the move. This made things much more difficult for the Russians, who attempted to fight the war by the books. With strong artillery preparation, and support by frontal aviation, the Russians began to move. But after one or two armored vehicles were burned, and ten to fifteen people were killed, they fell back and then a week later went through the quarter again. In fact, not one quarter was taken by the Russians in the attack. They occupied only areas that had been left unoccupied by our units and the militias. If there had been a line of communication between our units and the militias, I think that the defense of the city would have lasted longer.

While the battles were going on in the city, Dzhohar Dudayev gave the order to form a line of defense by region. That's how the seven fronts were created. Due to the movement of the Russian troops, certain areas became hotspots and received the status of separate fronts. Now it's difficult to determine how many existed, and for how many days.

The situation was such that from the beginning of March until the end of the first ten days of May the Russians didn't enter into direct confrontations. The largest losses on our side occurred exactly during that time period, because it was necessary for us to at least demonstrate our presence. The Russian troops occupied positions not more than half a kilometer from, or on the outskirts of, a populated area. The Russians stayed in place. The neutral zone was about one and a half or two kilometers. In the mornings, helicopters would hover over our positions and bomb us. The artillery was always at work. Contact occurred when our small diversionary groups could cut off the Russians when they moved in columns or when they transported provisions, military supplies, or water. The biggest losses our military forces suffered were from artillery preparations and bombardment.

On the 10th and 11th of May, as I've already said, the large-scale invasion of these three basic areas by Russian troops began. The third stage of the war began: the war in the mountains. So the Russians managed to move forward pretty quickly in these three areas: along the Videnski ravine, the Argunski ravine, and in the direction of Shatoi. And these three key points fell within three or four days of each other. It happened pretty quickly. There was no chance of withstanding the air attacks. The most powerful weapons which we had were large-caliber machine guns, 14.5 and 12.7, for which there were almost no rounds. Even when we had antiaircraft weapons, the Russian troops inflicted noticeable damage. As I've already mentioned, the subsequent military operations that Basayev commanded stopped that movement.

What followed was fairly non-traditional if looked at from the viewpoint of classical warfare. Negotiations began which lasted almost a year. During this period of negotiations our troops occupied all the territory and entrenched themselves in the city practically without firing a shot. The next phase of the war began: the March 1996 invasion by the Russians. The truth is that the lack of military supplies due to losses of the already drawn-out war, and the shortcomings of the population created fairly consequential problems, so our troops once again found themselves pushed back into the unmaneuverable mountains.

Then we undertook two operations. On 6 March: a scouting operation into Grozny, when a small group, about 1000 people, went unopposed into the city and held it for five days. The Russians didn't undertake one operation that hindered the entrance of our troops into the city. They were literally busy saving their lives. Basically, during these five days, the Russians

didn't take any initiatives at all. Then our units were ordered by Maskhadov to leave their positions in an organized manner.

August 1996, the most unexpected turning point in the war occurred for everyone, not only for us. Basically, our units again went into the city, and practically destroyed the Russian units that were there. Therefore the initiative of General Lebed is not nearly as humanitarian as it has been portrayed. He simply saved the remains of the defeated army. Two or three points were already entirely surrounded, where more than 1500 Russian soldiers were ready to surrender, and the only thing that saved these groups was Maskhadov's order.

What was the significance of Basayev's raid on the Russian city, Budenovski?

AKHMADOV: Well, in the first place, the Budenovski raid had more political than tactical significance. But if you look at it from the viewpoint of the art of war, it shows that, in spite of all the announcements about the reports of the Russian military leaders which were located in this military theatre of the Chechen Republic to the effect that our army was destroyed, or that General Dudayev had completely lost control of his units, the ingenious movement 350 kilometers inward, and the capture of territory, with a group numbering 157 to 160 soldiers, speaks for itself. General Basayev lost only 19 soldiers during the ingenious five-day operation. Of these 19 soldiers, if I'm not mistaken, only three of them were killed by the most elite units of the Russian army during the five-hour blitz. The rest of them were killed during the confusion of the first few minutes, when they attacked the unit on the right side. It was very difficult because of the large civilian population around.

Then when they dug in and occupied positions in the hospital, they were surrounded. You can imagine how thick a ring the Russian army was able to make in the depths of its own territory. During all five days of this firestorm, only three people were lost. The positions were occupied with such discipline that the Russians were simply fended off. Basayev held control all the way until the last attempt. And the results of this situation were incredible. Looking at it from a military viewpoint, it doesn't even make sense to assign credit. I think that even the Americans, and I don't mean this offensively, when they evacuated their embassy in Iran, made many more mistakes than Basayev did when he conducted this operation. I think that it has a very strong place, at least amongl operations conducted after World War II.

I've heard the war broken into three phases. How many losses were there in each stage?

AKHMADOV: Well, that's fairly difficult, because as I've already said, the Chechen army still had not gone through a classical stage of formation. That is, this whole system of reporting losses and current strength exists in an army which has already been completely formed, thus making it easier to keep track of these things than it was for us. The total number of losses among our combatants was based on the fact that besides those who actually bore arms at the time, civilians who took up arms and came to fight with us were also included. They usually suffered most of the losses, those who didn't have experience. And according to the reports of our unit commanders, about 3500 to 4000 of our opposition forces were killed. But many civilian people who only fought for literally one hour were killed. As soon as the Russians entered the city, anyone who jumped up with a weapon in his hands was killed within the hour. It's difficult to confirm these numbers, so they are fairly relative.

Most of the losses that occurred during the battles of 1995 were of people who didn't have a weapon and were constantly trying to obtain a weapon. The tactic was extremely simple. If a Russian soldier with an assault weapon was left in the neutral zone, Russian snipers used the following tactic: Whoever crawled up to the weapon first was wounded. He would, naturally, cry for help. You can leave a corpse until nighttime, when it is possible to retrieve it, but when a wounded soldier cries for help, usually three or four people would also die trying to retrieve a wounded soldier. In this way it was sometimes possible to kill, with one assault rifle, five or six people who didn't have a weapon and wanted to obtain that weapon. These were the largest losses. Those units which were mobile and got around quickly suffered practically no losses. By the way, among those who were armed during this period of winter street battles in Grozny, we had even fewer losses then later during the battles in the foothills and the subsequent battles in May through June 1995.

The number of Russians lost is difficult to count not only for us, but also for the Russians themselves. Because they operated on the system of combined units. There were practically no numbered units here. The numbered units were located at their places of deployment, and from these numbered units, combined units were formed. A certain contingent of a numbered

regiment was taken from two or three regiments and formed into a new unit that was not counted anywhere. Well, it is figured somewhere in the operational command of the general staff in Russia.

I personally collected about 2500 service records between 31 December and 7 January, that is, the soldiers' army certificates. It also wasn't possible to collect these papers from the corpses that were burned, and not every commander collected these papers. So it's a fairly arbitrary number. According to the testimony of the general staff, during this one-week period, they lost about 4000 people in the city. The Maiyakopski brigade and the Samarski 181st regiment ceased to exist. About 350 armored units were destroyed during the New Year blitz.

The loss of soldiers was a problem to calculate. As a rule, any change of assignment for a soldier is noted in a booklet on the day of his arrival at this new duty station. A stamp is immediately placed in the operational area to the effect that the particular soldier has arrived at the unit and is ready for duty, and a seal is affixed. But among theses 2500 service records there were only a few dozen that had these formalities in them. The rest of the soldiers weren't included on any list of any unit. That is to say, they didn't exist.

What was it like for an ordinary member of the militia to participate in military operations? Can you relate any personal experiences?

AKHMADOV: On one hand, of course, it was difficult for us to do battle with the Russians, because they were fully equipped. Take, for instance, one Russian motor rifle battalion. If you look at the level of equipment for their maintenance bases, their artillery, artillery support, air support, communications support, corrective support, and medical equipment, one motor rifle battalion was equipped better than the entire Chechen army. So there were a great many difficulties. On the other hand, one advantage we had was that most of the Chechens had served in the ranks of the Soviet army. Maskhadov was an officer in the Soviet army for a long time. He retired as a colonel. Most of the Chechens had served in the active-duty ranks of the Soviet army. For instance, I served in the Soviet army five years.

It is a very great advantage when the enemy speaks a language you understand very well. Tactics like radio misinformation were used quite often. The radios in absolutely every captured transport or tank were all tuned to the frequency of it's own unit. Our radio operators often managed to get Russian firepower aimed directly at Russian positions. The tactic of penetrating between two columns traveling in parallel was also used. This usually happened when columns were marching at night, or when we penetrated between two positions, because the Russians had a great lack of coordination between the units of the internal army and the normal army. It was enough to get between two columns, fire off a couple of shots in one direction or the other, and these columns would start to mow each other down, sometimes for two or three hours. Sometimes only when both sides independently called for air or artillery support, did they start to understand that they were fighting themselves. These tactics were used very often.

Then, we, the people who lived in the city, who know every little corner, often felt quite at ease and quite safe in the city. There were times when groups of up to 70 people made their way quietly through dead space when Russians were within 30-40 meters on either side.

Basically, the knowledge of the language, the knowledge of the Russian psychology, and the structure of their philosophy was a great advantage. The Russian army is not very different from the Soviet army. The only difference is that there are no Chechens in the Russian army. It's the same tremendously large and immobile machine that the Soviet army was. It was very easy to take advantage of that. The Chechens speak Russian without and accent and it wasn't difficult to lead them astray. And then at night the Russians became interested only in the area in which they were physically located. They lost interest in everything that didn't concern their personal safety. That's a terrible shortcoming of an invading soldier. Therefore our troops came to life at night. Constant movement and night battles. This really wore the Russians down. Those were the basic tactics. So, for instance, thinking about Remarque's novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front,* that, of course, was a completely different war.

Regarding the death of the first president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, General Dudayev, well, a big mistake that many Western observers and the Russians made was to attempt to characterize the war on our territory from 1994 to 1996 according to classical military thinking. I'll give you an analogous example: The Russians stubbornly tried to raise an ensign over the remains of Rezkom, the building that is the presidential residence here. General Maskhadov ordered the defenders to desert it because there wasn't any tactical or strategic reason to preserve it. It was simply a ruined building.

Russians didn't approach the building for another 12 hours, and then raised some rag. I don't even

remember which one. Maybe it was from the 144th motor rifle regiment. Look at the commotion that was caused by the raising of the ensign over the remains of the Rezkom. The Russians thought that if they raised that rag over this palace that the war was over. It was stupid. The Chechens have led a regular, systematic, and continuous war against the Russians for 300 years, since 1708 AD, you could say. We'll continue to fight as long as there is one square foot of land on which we can stand, and as long as we are still alive.

For us, classical European examples, such as the raising of an ensign over the remains of a presidential palace, don't mean anything. It's the same thing concerning the death of Dudayev. General Dudayev died like a soldier at his post. His death didn't give rise to any disappointment of the Chechens, and of course it didn't weaken us in any way. For a Chechen at war, the highest reward is death. So Dudayev found himself among those who Allah had smiled upon. The death of Dudayev didn't give rise to any infighting or perturbations among the Chechen leadership. Everything continued as before. Everything was accepted as the natural consequences of war. On the death of Dudayev, in accordance with the constitution of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, his vice president, Inderbiev, took his place. Yes, we accepted the fact with sorrow, but it didn't shake anyone's belief in the truth we are fighting for. So we accept it all very philosophically. Chechens accept death very philosophically, especially during war. General Dudayev was worthy of the death of a soldier. We are just proud that he courageously went down the path that Allah laid down for him on this Earth, from the beginning until the end.

The cult of the warrior is strong in Chechnya. Can you comment on this, and also on the role that religion plays?

AKHMADOV: I think that Chechens are a peaceful people, but Chechens are warriors. To be a warrior is to have a deeper and broader understanding than people who are simply warmongers. Yes, Chechens are warriors, but Chechens aren't like classical warriors. Chechens take life in the barracks very hard, because as you know, barracks life, with all its characteristics, subverts any individuality a person has. Although Chechens are warriors, that doesn't stop us from feeling the joy of life and beauty, or to be philosophers.

Concerning religion among the Chechens, there is a strong Sufi influence among us. That is to say, Islamic philosophy. Almost every Chechen is an autonomous Sufi. That's a rather complex side of our life, and difficult to explain within the boundaries of this interview. But in spite of, and maybe because of the fact that for practically 400 years, we have been in a state of war, we prize peace, and all that is connected with life. You see, after such a terrible apocalypse, and among all these ruins, you can still see so many people laughing. Chechens accept it philosophically.

It doesn't really scare us that our buildings have been destroyed. Earlier, during the Russian-Caucasus war, you built during the night, and nobody could give you a guarantee that the village would last until tomorrow. In spite of that, people built in order to have a normal place to live for at least one day. The next day the Russians would come and destroy the village. The Chechens didn't give up. They built another village again, and it went on like that. I'll tell you that for the Chechens to be like the Russians, who love everything connected with a material life, would be very difficult.

I'll tell you a quote from a general who participated in that old war, Major General Ol'shevski. In his memoirs, *An Expedition in the Caucasus*, he writes something which very strongly grabbed my attention, and burned itself into my memory. It went approximately like this: the concept of property among the Chechen people is absolutely atrophied. When we invade their cities, you don't see any Chechen anywhere trying to save his belongings or any of his wealth. All of them, from the youngest to the oldest, are motivated by one desire—to shed as much of the invaders' blood as possible. That is, in that moment when war breaks out, none of these things have any meaning. Everyone turns all of their attention on the war in order to defend their freedom and independence. Of course this didn't just crystallize in one day. In order to become who we are today, the Chechens have gone through a great many ordeals, which probably not every nation has had to pass through. And nevertheless, in spite of all the negative things which are evident here, I think that *the Chechens are* very good people who courageously face life, and who are very aware of the space they occupy and the period of time they are in.

What strategic significance do the mountains have?

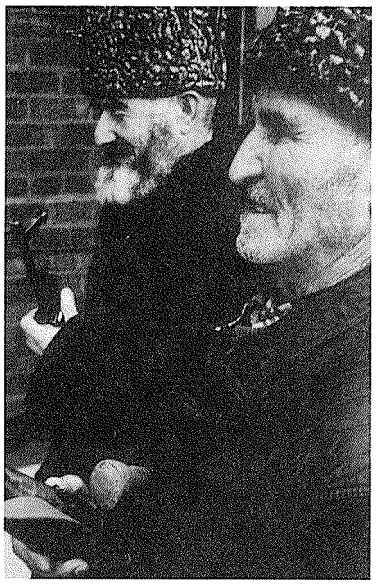
AKHMADOV: The mountains? The mountains have many meanings, and they are all important for us. But first and foremost, the mountains have made us who we are. Secondly, the Almighty punished us on this slice of the Northern Caucasus because it turns out that our

people inhabited a strategic position. That is, whether or not we want to admit it, we occupy a key position, both political and military, and by virtue of this we also play an important role in forming the mentality of the Northern Caucasus. There are many mountains, and it's because of these mountains. The mountains have done this to us, and I think that trying to consider them only as a natural defense undermines their significance. No, it's an outlook on life: an enormous philosophical outlook which formed this population that today enjoys peace. In short, it's the Chechens.

There are many different ethnic groups in Dagestan; does that play a role in the situation in Dagestan?

AKHMADOV: The war in Chechnya was quite natural. Chechnya never voluntarily entered into a dependent relationship with Russia. But Dagestan, in spite of the fact that part of Dagestan took part in the Russian-Caucasian war under the leadership of Imam Shaganin, in time was broken up into Hun-ruled territories and displayed its will to be loyal to the rulers. And therefore, only a small part of Dagestan fought in the last war, and for the Russians it's a sort of outpost between Transcaucasia and the Northern Caucasus. You can consider it that way. If uprisings occur in Dagestan, then I think the situation will radically change the shape of things in the Northern Caucasus.

There is another problem that differentiates the situation in Dagestan from that in Chechnya. The Chechens never had any interdependent relations. That is, there weren't ever any feudal lords. Everyone was equal. In Dagestan slavery flourished among some groups and there were only a few groups which managed to maintain any kind of independence. So a sort of Dagestan aristocracy developed. And that also had something to do with Dagestan's participation in the war. Today it's represented by clans. When they talk about clans in Chechnya, that's nonsense. The only clans that exist in Chechnya are those that the Soviet system gave rise to. That is, a person is appointed to some post, and a clan formed around him. But this clan wasn't connected by genealogy. There was no blood connection. A clan could be made up of me and my friend, who shares my things of value, from my possessions to my food. It's a little bit different in Dagestan. There are many more people making up the political process than in Chechnya. So there's a very complicated mass of political collisions. If there is a flare-up there, I'm sure that the situation in the Northern Caucasus will change radically.



Older generation of Chechen warriors.

Will the Russians take action against Chechnya because, either officially or unofficially, Chechnya is helping Dagestan?

AKHMADOV: It's obvious that the Russians will take action not only in the case of a war with Dagestan, but in any spot in the Northern Caucasus and even in Transcaucasia. Now there are a few hotspots. They are the problem in Abkhazia and Georgia, the problem of Southern Ossetia and Georgia, the problem of Ingushetia and Ossetia, and the problem of Dagestan. In all these spots, literally, the situation is such that probably only a small push would be needed to start things. They haven't quieted down and they aren't solved. They've just been muffled. It's just like doping up a sick person on morphine to take away the pain, and then doing nothing about his illness. At the present time, the Russians don't have any mechanism to solve such problems. And if, in even one of these spots, military action begins to take place, I think the Russians will take extreme measures to block the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. I think that if a war doesn't happen in Dagestan, you could expect direct interference in Chechnya from Russia, who would blame Chechnya as a base for forces that would go to war in Dagestan.

I think it will still be a long time before one can peacefully sigh and say that in the Caucasus some sort of stability has been achieved. Perhaps Chechnya will flower on its own now. We can build our production, and resolve our social problems. Maybe Dagestan will be on its own. But until that time when all of the populations of the Northern Caucasus obtain their independence, they won't have the opportunity to establish their own governments. Then this problem will continue. As long as Russia still has a presence here, we will always have either active conflicts or the potential for conflict. But the Russian process of leaving the Caucasus began in 1991. They came here with much bloodshed, and they'll leave here with much bloodshed. There's no doubt! I don't know how long it will last. Maybe 50, maybe 100 years. But the process has begun. I think that the explosive potential of this region will disappear only when the Russians are gone.

What is the nature of Chechen support in the Dagestan war?

AKHMADOV: I can answer this question from a political viewpoint. I think that support that expresses itself in terms of equipment, ammunition, or soldiers sent there is insignificant compared to the fact that the war in Dagestan is a war for national freedom. It's the fact that we fought the Russian Empire together with the Dagestanis for many years. I think it's a war with which we empathize in our hearts. I'm not talking about the government, that is the business of official politics, but empathy in the hearts of every Chechen. That's the only answer I can give.

Concerning the previous point, in which I said that the Chechens have empathy in their hearts. The war in Abkhazia, Georgia versus Abkhazia, gave rise to that feeling in the hearts of Chechens. As a result Abkhazia won. Little Abkhazia was victorious over enormous Georgia. But it's very important to remember that in that war

the Chechens did not fight the Georgians. The Chechens simply followed their principle: they helped the little guy. If Russia invaded Georgia today, and I'm simply talking about the common people, the Chechens would go help the Georgians.

Despite our small numbers, the Chechens have survived, thanks to the fact that we follow our principles. And one of our principles happens to be that one should help the weak. To help the weak defend their own freedom, because there is nothing greater than freedom. We have declared that for 300 years, paying for it with our own blood, and always motivated by this freedom.

Dodge Billingsley has been engaged in security research in the Caucasus since 1993. He has worked on defense-related films for the History Channel and the Discovery Channel. He is the producer and director of the film "Immortal Fortress: A Look Inside Chechnya's Warrior Culture," awarded the 1999 Bronze Plaque.